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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

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Subject: "Pie Problems." Information from the Bureau of Home Economics, U. S. Department of Agriculture.

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Lower crusts and leaking juice -- these seem to be the big problems agitating the nation's pie makers right now. I judge that from the questions in the daily mail bag. As soon as the berries and cherries and other juicy fruits are ripe, the pie makers' problems arise and also the flooding tide of their letters. They want to know how to bake a juicy fruit pie without a soggy crust. And they want to know how to prevent the juice from bubbling out into the oven.

Well, I don't need to tell you that making a perfect pie of juicy fruit is an art. And probably I don't need to add that, as in the other arts, the artists often differ a good deal as to methods. They agree generally that the pastry, lower crust included, should be flaky and delicate and that the pie should never run over, but they go about creating flaky crust and avoiding run overs in different ways. One school of pie-makers believes in baking the bottom crust before putting in the fruit. The other school believes in baking crust and fruit together. English cooks don't have to worry about this because they make their pies -- or tarts, as they call any fruit pie -- with no bottom crust, just as we often make our "deep-dish" pie. But the typical American fruit pie has a lower crust. And a good American fruit pie has a crust that is neither soaked nor soggy.

Most summer pie fruits have a good deal of juice. Blackberries, blueberries, elderberries, gooseberries, cherries, peaches, plums -- think how much juice every one has. Heat makes this juice flow. So does the sugar you add to sweeten the fruit. And the juice will certainly soak into your pastry unless you know a few tricks to prevent it.

You can take your choice of two good ways of saving the lower crust. The first way is the old-fashioned way. Your grandmother probably used it. It's the shortest method but not the most certain of success. Line your pie pan with a thin sheet of dough big enough to come fully over the edge of the pan. Now put in the fresh fruit mixed with sugar; dot with butter; and sprinkle on a little flour. Then, moisten the rim of the bottom crust and cover the whole pie with another thin sheet of dough that has a little opening cut in the center to let out steam. Press the edges of the dough together and "crimp" them, either with your fingers or a fork. Now slip the pie into a hot oven -- one that registers from 400 to 450 degrees Fahrenheit.

Please note the hot oven. You need a good deal of heat right at first on the bottom of the pan so the crust will bake before the fruit juice can soak in. Then, after about 15 minutes, when the dough has cooked but isn't yet brown, lower the heat until you have only a moderate oven, and cook until the pie is

nicely browned. By that time your fruit is cooked enough -- and it should not have bubbled over on the crust and spoiled the looks of your pie.

That's the first method of making a juicy fruit pie. Now for the second method. This takes longer but has proved more certain of success than any other. Bake your bottom pastry shell before you put in your juicy fruit. But bake it very lightly -- until it just begins to brown. You see, it mustn't get too done on its first trip to the oven, for it has to go in again with the fruit. While the crust is baking, heat the fruit in a saucepan just enough to start the flow of juice. Now, strain off the juice and add to it a very little cornstarch well mixed with sugar. Cook this mixture until it thickens slightly. Put the fruit back into the thickened juice. Then, pour this filling into the baked pastry shell. Cover with a sheet of dough and bake your pie in a moderately hot oven -- one that registers about 375 to 400 degrees.

When you use this pre-cooking method of making pie, of course you don't need an oven as hot as you do when all the ingredients go in together uncooked. But you always need to control the temperature carefully and also the cooking time, or the fruit which is hot when it goes into the pie may boil over. In fact, no matter which method you use, you are likely to have trouble with the juice running out of the pie during the first of the baking. A clever device to prevent this is a little funnel that you make yourself of stout brown paper. Roll a piece of paper into a funnel and stick it in the opening of the top crust as you put the pie in the oven. The boiling fruit juice will bubble up into this funnel and then fall back harmlessly into the pie. You'll prevent the juice from escaping from the edge of the pie by pinching or crimping the upper and lower crusts closely together.

Then, the slight amount of thickening you use in your pie is also a help against escaping juice. What kind of thickening to use? Well, some cooks say flour; others say cornstrach; still others favor tapioca. Take your choice, but whichever you use, remember not to add too much. The idea of thickening here is simply to restrain the juice a little to prevent it from being too "runny". Too much thickening will spoil the best of fruit pies. Cornstarch takes a little longer to cook than flour, but many people prefer it for a fruit pie because it becomes clear when cooked -- gives more of the natural fruit look. Whenever you use cornstarch to thicken fruit juice, be sure to mix it well with sugar first and cook it until thoroughly done. There's nothing worse than a raw starch flavor in a fruit pie. If you use tapioca, let the fresh fruit stand in some sugar with a little tapioca sprinkled in so that the sugar draws out juice from the fruit and the tapioca blends and thickens it.

Still a third way to avoid a soggy crust and leaking juice is to make tarts or open pies with shells baked in advance. Just before serving, put in the filling, heat the tart to crisp it and serve it hot.
